



The Dawn Chorus

One of my favorite tasks as a biologist is participating in the Breeding Bird Survey. In the fourth year of a five year project, the goal of the BBS is to identify every bird species that currently breeds in Minnesota and where in the state each species breeds. As one of the surveyors, my job involves a slow walk through the woods, identifying and recording evidence of every bird species I encounter. The very best time of day for most of these surveys is in the early

morning, when forest birds are the most actively singing. The vast majority of birds will be identified by their song alone, as they are generally well hidden within the foliage of the trees.

This is a challenging task, and one that I am only moderately good at. Part of my problem is a poor memory, and I find it necessary to continually brush up on my bird song identification skills. Part of my problem is just how many different bird species exist out there. Located in the transition zone between the boreal forest, hardwood forest, and the prairie, the birds of the Chippewa National Forest are as varied as the habitats that support them. Over 700 lakes, extensive marshes, open areas, and the deciduous and conifer forest, provide habitat for at least 244 species of birds. Of the 244 bird species that may be found on the Chippewa, only 26 of them reside on the Forest year-round. Most of the birds are migratory, using the Chippewa for only a portion of their lives.

Beyond the Chippewa, the breeding bird communities of the western Great Lakes region have among the richest diversity of breeding bird species in North America. The relatively heavily forested landscapes of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin are considered to be population 'sources' for many forest species in the modern landscape, and may be supplementing population 'sinks' in the agricultural landscapes of the lower Midwest. In fact, large, contiguous forested regions like northern Minnesota are thought to be the best hope for conservation of both resident and migratory songbirds. Habitat loss and fragmentation have reduced songbird populations throughout the U.S. Over the past 150 years, Minnesota has lost nearly half of its forest land, mostly in central and southern parts of the state.

For the past 20 years, breeding bird monitoring has been conducted on the Chippewa, Superior, and Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests through a partnership with the University of Minnesota – Duluth. The Natural Resources Research Institute (NRRI) has monitored forest song birds with over 1600 off-road sampling points designed to track regional population trends.

Analysis of population trends is used as an early warning system of potential problems in a species' population, and serves as a measure of the ecological conditions of the environment.

The ovenbird is likely the most numerous of breeding birds found on the Chippewa. A familiar song to many forest users, the loud "*Teacher...Teacher...Teacher*" is the way to recognize this bird. The singing is performed by the males, and is about establishing and defending territories in which they and their mates will rear their young. Territories are largest where the least amount of food is available. Insects are the primary food of the ovenbird.

Like many other songbirds, singing of the ovenbird decreases when the birds pair, and even more so when the young fledge. It becomes noticeably quieter in the woods long before summer wanes.

Ovenbirds reside primarily in mature deciduous and mixed forests. They build domed nests on the ground, constructed of dead leaves, grasses, stems and bark, and lined with deer or horse hair. The nests are thought to resemble a Dutch oven; hence the bird's name.

Large for a warbler, ovenbirds are about the size of a sparrow (6 inches), and weigh about 0.7 ounces. They winter as far south as northern South America, and lose about 1% of their body mass per hour of migration. Ovenbirds migrate at night; it is not entirely clear how they find their way over the long and arduous route. Three years is a common lifespan for this bird.

Ovenbirds are sensitive to forest edges. In heavily fragmented landscapes, ovenbirds are frequent victims to brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds, who lay their eggs in other species' nests, relying on the host birds to raise the cowbird chicks. Ovenbirds also suffer greater predation rates near forest edges. Predators of ovenbirds include squirrels, raccoons, skunks, weasels, owls, hawks, crows, and grackles. NRRI monitoring indicates ovenbird populations are currently stable on the Chippewa National Forest.

All things considered, I would say I am really only a mediocre birder, but I love to try. There's something just really special about focusing on the choir of birds in the forest, first thing in the morning... especially if you are lucky enough to attend the concert on one of those cooler mornings, before the mosquitoes really stir themselves. Not an early riser? Pitch a tent in a Chippewa campground, and you can hear the dawn chorus from the comfort of your bed.

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